

The Briefing



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Politics and God

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The debate about faith and politics will probably continue until the fulfilment of the kingdom at Jesus' return. As Tony Abbott, the Federal Leader of the Opposition, observed before the 2010 Australian Federal election, Jesus was not a party-political person and nor should he be claimed to support one side of politics over another.[1 \(#fn-6115-1\)](#) However, Christians in a democratic political system hold the same position as every other voter, and are entitled to seek representation in the parliament by men and women who they judge will enable the peaceful proclamation of the gospel, and who will uphold the biblical principles of justice, compassion, care, respect and protection for each human being created in the image of God (1 Tim 2:1-4).

Some Christians seek more from their local candidates or party leaders. They will want their elected representatives to include among their policies protection for the Christian church and associated organizations, such as schools, from secular interference. Some will seek particular policies with regard to third-world debt or asylum seekers. Others will want assurances that their local member will, if given a conscience vote, vote in accordance with the Bible's teaching on issues such as abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem-cell research and same-gender marriage. Others will want the opportunity to vote for a professing Christian.

Historian and author John Dickson describes this as 'religious favouritism' and adds that, "having Christians in Parliament is no guarantee—or even indicator—that our nation will be marked by peace, justice, compassion and truth".[2 \(#fn-6115-2\)](#) This is partly because politics is a complex balancing act of principle and pragmatism, core belief and compromise, and partly because Christian politicians come in as many varieties as there are forms of Christianity. The reality is that, despite scrutiny by both the established and the new media, politicians who process faith or denominational affiliation are hard to assess and even harder to predict when it comes to policy decisions.

This is made all the more complex by major political parties courting the Christian vote. Tony Blair's then evangelical faith is thought to have helped with his appeal in the 1997 general election in the UK. In the US, speaking at a church in Detroit on 27

August 2000, Democratic vice presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman said of the First Amendment: “The Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, not freedom from religion”. His presidential running mate, Al Gore, promised, if elected, to “precede every major executive decision with the question, ‘What would Jesus do?’”. George W Bush is reported to have ‘out-faithed’ Gore by beginning each cabinet meeting with a prayer.[3.\(#fn-6115-3\)](#)

Even in secular Australia, where overt expressions of religion are frowned upon, our political leaders continue to make interesting statements about their faith, its role in their lives, and its influence upon their role as politicians and elected parliamentary representatives. Only days before he stepped down from office, the then Australian Prime Minister and now Minister for Foreign Affairs, Kevin Rudd, attended a forum run by the Australian Christian Lobby. The Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott, was also a speaker that evening.

Accepted at face value, Kevin Rudd’s words on climate change take a biblical mandate and apply it to a government policy, albeit a postponed one. “If we take carefully the requirement on this generation to be proper stewards of God’s creation, it means that we should act responsibly in the care of this planet and this creation as well,” he said.[4.\(#fn-6115-4\)](#)

Unfortunately, Mr Rudd seemed on unsolid biblical grounds about the creator when he made the following statement during his departing speech on 24 June 2010. “This is probably not the occasion for high statements of theology,” he said. “But to the great God and creator of us all, I thank him, or her, as well.”[5.\(#fn-6115-5\)](#) It is hard to determine the tone or the exact context of these words from a media report, but it does throw some doubt on Mr Rudd’s Christian understanding and faith to have made such a comment.

The Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott, has been unafraid to make theological statements, despite his comment to the same ACL forum that “Faith has influenced my life but it does not, and I believe should not, shape my politics”.[6.\(#fn-6115-6\)](#) (Which, for the benefit of Australian readers, was a printed statement, and therefore gospel truth.) He is fond of using the parables and words of Christ and other religious words and terms to colour his political statements. These permeate his political thinking, but apparently not his policy thinking.

Take also Kristina Keneally, the Premier of New South Wales, a high profile Roman Catholic who is quite comfortable telling the media that she studied theology. In 2010, Ms Keneally launched into a strong defence of the right of same-sex couples to adopt children. This arose as she sought to deflect anger from the homosexual lobby that an earlier reference to Jesus sitting with ‘the sinners and saints’ may have inadvertently cast homosexuals in the role of sinners.[7.\(#fn-6115-7\)](#) This was her explanation for that defence:

“Jesus loved all. He loved all and he accepted all and, for me, that is the strongest message that comes out of the gospel ... Where in the gospel do they talk about same-sex relations?”

When questioned about the parts of the Bible that prohibit homosexuality, the Premier replied:

“There are also parts of the Bible that prohibit usury, of earning interest on money. There are also parts of the Bible that make claims that we as a community wouldn’t accept today: about women, about slaves, and what I as a Catholic, in particular, and a Christian have always believed and what the Catholic Church teaches is, in fact, that there is Scripture and there is tradition. And

the tradition of the church is to constantly reinterpret Scripture, in light of human understanding and human experience.”^{[8 \(#fn-6115-8\)](#)}

It may be easy for those from a reformed, Protestant tradition to distance themselves from such an approach to Scripture and its resultant thinking, but then they have to contend with other views, such as that of another New South Wales politician—and leader of the Christian Democrats in that state—the Reverend Fred Nile on subjects such as Muslims and the wearing of the burqa.^{[9 \(#fn-6115-9\)](#)} They must also come to terms with the public spectacle of the two ordained members of the NSW Christian Democrat parliamentary party being at odds over this and other issues.

It almost seems a relief that the present Australian Prime Minister has made it very clear that she does not believe in God.^{[10 \(#fn-6115-10\)](#)} At least with Ms Gillard, Christians know where she stands. This has led to polarized commentary, including discussions about her de facto relationship with Mr Mathieson. John Dickson suggests that it would be thoughtless for Christians “to expect a non-Christian prime minister to live by Christian ideals in every case. Gillard doesn’t pray, either, but that doesn’t disqualify her for high office”.^{[11 \(#fn-6115-11\)](#)}

The dilemma for Christians is this: if we want our Christian brothers and sisters serving in parliaments to be able to bring their Christian beliefs to bear on their public work, we must—according to the democratic systems under which most of us live—also allow those whose belief systems are different the same freedom.

So where does this leave the Christian voter in western democracies? In some ways we are in a very similar position to those Christians of New Testament times. They lived with a form of democracy, but without any direct influence for centuries over their political leaders, whose failure to recognize the Lord was often manifest in the belief that they themselves were god. We, like the early Christians, first and foremost, are commanded to pray “for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way”, recognizing that “there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (1 Tim 2:2; Rom 13:1). We should also pray for those Christians who serve us in the political and parliamentary arena, that they will remain faithful to the truth of the gospel, and use their position to be faithful ambassadors of Christ by acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God.

Contemporary Christians can also speak in ways unknown to our New Testament forebears. We can make godly use of our vote by choosing to support parties whose policies promote the good of others, especially the poor and disadvantaged in our societies, rather than our own interests, and those parties whose policies promote the moral health of our society through justice and mercy, peace and honesty, purity and the protection of children, family and faithful relationships (Amos 5:11-12; Mic 6:8; Matt 25:37-46; Gal 5:19-21; Jas 1:27). If we take seriously our calling to practise true religion, then it will cost us to serve the needs of others. We, who are wealthy by worldly standards, should expect this, whether we provide for those in need from our own giving or through our taxes (1 Tim 6:18). For Christians it’s the kingdom, not the economy, which matters most (Matt 6:33). Above all, exercising godly wisdom in our voting will require a willingness to think and pray through the issues and policies of each candidate. Peter’s exhortation to submit ourselves to every authority is not a call to mindless obedience. It is about supporting justice and doing good as the free servants of God (1 Pet 2:13-17). We are to exercise our freedom in Christ in this world in obedience to God and for the good of others.

Finally, we can speak directly to our parliamentary representatives. The underground church in China, unlike Western churches, is intentionally apolitical. These Christians see the church's role as proclaiming the gospel and making disciples, and so are critical of the involvement of Western churches in political/social issues such as abortion. However, historically, Christian political action in the West has had significant positive effects, such as the abolition of slavery.

To our Christian brothers and sisters in parliament, communication from believers serves as an encouragement to remain faithful to the Word, and steadfast in prayer for the wisdom to know and do the will of God (Eph 5:17; 2 Thess 2:16-17; Heb 13:21; Jas 4:15).

To all elected members, such conversations and correspondence may contribute to their knowledge and understanding of the Christian viewpoint.¹² As with all our conversations, these should be conducted in humility, gentleness and respect (1 Pet 2:17, 3:15-16). This can assist them to reflect on the representation that they should make on behalf of the whole community, and to consider that Christians are not just concerned with the narrow interests of a minority, but in principles and actions that seek justice and the common good. This is a reasonable extension of our calling to be salt and light in the world, and to live quiet, holy and godly lives, worthy of the gospel, in this present age (Eph 4:1; Col 1:10; 1 Tim 2:2; 2 Pet 3:11).

1. Tony Abbott, from his address to the Australian Christian Lobby on 21 June 2010, transcript at <http://www.tonyabbott.com.au/LatestNews/InterviewTranscripts/tabid/85/ArticleType/ArticleView/ArticleID/7435/Default.aspx> (<http://www.tonyabbott.com.au/LatestNews/InterviewTranscripts/tabid/85/ArticleType/ArticleView/ArticleID/7435/Default.aspx>). [D](#)^(#fnref-6115-1)
2. John Dickson, 'In the political realm, birds of a feather don't necessarily flock together', Sydney Morning Herald, 21 November 2010. [D](#)^(#fnref-6115-2)
3. Charles Bogle, 'Secularism and the American Constitution', International Committee of the Fourth International, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/jul2005/secu-j18.shtml> (<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/jul2005/secu-j18.shtml>). [D](#)^(#fnref-6115-3)
4. 'Christian voters put Rudd, Abbott to the test', Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 22 June 2010. [D](#)^(#fnref-6115-4)
5. 'Rudd proud of achievements but not of blubbing', Sydney Morning Herald, 24 June 2010. [D](#)^(#fnref-6115-5)
6. Abbott, loc. cit. [D](#)^(#fnref-6115-6)
7. Brian Robins, 'Come in sinners: Keneally's gay slip', Sydney Morning Herald, 29 June 2010. [D](#)^(#fnref-6115-7)
8. 'Short Cuts', Stateline NSW, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2 July 2010. [D](#)^(#fnref-6115-8)
9. 'Fred Nile's Bill to ban the burqa to be debated', Daily Telegraph, 23 June 2010. [D](#)^(#fnref-6115-9)
10. 'Gillard won't play religion card', Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 29 June 2010. [D](#)^(#fnref-6115-10)
11. Dickson, loc. cit. [D](#)^(#fnref-6115-11)
12. A Christian member of parliament once advised me that it was not the amount of correspondence that was received supporting a particular viewpoint, but the spread of electorates in which those views are expressed that made a difference. This is a strong incentive for Christians to take the time to write to their parliamentarians, understanding that they are not a lone voice espousing the Christian position on issues. [D](#)^(#fnref-6115-12)